

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Call Off the Tanks

MIKHAIL Gorbachev, who pledged not to use force in Lithuania, is using force in Lithuania. He speaks for a great power to which democracy is still a stranger, and he is attempting to roll back a democratic choice made by a small country. His policy is designed to intimidate the Lithuanians, nullify expressions of their nationhood, put on them the tactical onus of initiating bloodshed, divide ethnic Lithuanians from other Lithuanians and isolate them from the outside world. These are the chilling methods of a leader who otherwise boasts of a commitment to free choice and openness.

Many people now say the Lithuanians would have done better to have sought their freedom by the Kremlin's secession process rather than by their own initiative of independence. But this process exists only as a draft in Mr. Gorbachev's legislature. As the crisis gathered, he had the choice of mobilizing the legislature or mobilizing the army. He mobilized the army. Now he "proposes" that the Lithuanian legislature overrule the "incumbent Lithuanian leadership" and annul its "hasty" and "illegal" declaration of independence to avert "grave consequences for all of us." Missing is any explicit Kremlin contribution to unwinding a crisis that is

greatly of its own making and that it allowed to flower.

Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister, is arriving in Washington to work up the June summit. He does not need to be shown American "understanding" for the step backward that President Gorbachev is taking now so that—in the official explanation—he can take other steps forward later. Such understanding too easily becomes permissiveness and even encouragement. It needs to be underlined to Mr. Shevardnadze that the premise of American regard for perestroika is its continuity, deepening and consistency, *especially* in the hard places. This is the premise of official policy and public opinion alike.

Mr. Gorbachev pretty much sat back and did little for two years while Lithuania moved publicly and determinedly toward independence, and now he demands that Lithuania annul its declaration "immediately." This would be amusing if it were not so dangerous. Various ideas for pauses and alternative approaches are in the air: a popular referendum, reference to the World Court, mediation, negotiation and so on. The sponsors of these ideas are not oblivious to the Soviet Union's requirements. Mr. Gorbachev must better show he is not oblivious to Lithuania's. For openers, why not call off the tanks?